

There is very little creative programming being undertaken on the N.Y. FM spectrum, resigning AM radio to be the hopelessly commercial quagmire that it is. Simple marketing theory states that for a commercial medium to survive, much less prosper, it needs numbers, preferably large ones, to compete in the ratings game. This usually involves economizing the presentation (e.g., radio format) down to the lowest common denominator to appeal to the broadest range of individuals--the housewife washing her husband's army collars with the latest lemon-freshened washday miracle, the students passing the joint around the dorm, the commuters snarled in rush hour traffic crawling home from work, in short, consumers--for the obvious reason that commercial media, by definition, have products to sell. Their creative potential is limited, necessarily or otherwise, by what they perceive the majority of their audience's sensibilities and prejudices to be. In effect, corporate broadcasting fosters a conservative atmosphere.

In the past few years, there has been a trend towards over-commercialization on FM, to wit: the demise of WNCN (the last full-time classical music station); the qualitative "demise" of WNEW-FM, WPLJ and, in due time, WQIV; the ever-critical financial condition of WRAI; and the increasing number of stations adopting variations on rock formats. What started out as "free-form" radio years ago, streamlined down to progressive rock and now appears to be--Praise Jesus--the status quo. "You won't fool the Children of the Revolution," I suppose, but everybody's gotta pay the rent.

WPMU is a non-commercial station. It has nothing to sell, hence, it is not dependent on advertising revenues; its survival is not dependent on competing for a sizeable share of the listening audience; it does not--in a sense--have to "pay the rent." Within the bounds of the regulations of the FCC, WPMU has no vested interest to answer to but itself--the staff, primarily, and interested members of the Upsala community. (Your audience is what you make it.) Its creative potential is therefore greater than that of any commercial radio station. College radio (e.g., WPMU) is in a position to offer alternatives to over-commercialization.

WPMU's content, at present, overlaps with a number of other metropolitan area stations, both commercial and non-commercial (WFDU, WPLJ, WQIV, WNEW-FM, WPUV, WSOU). There is little or no public affairs programming; the station's format is linear in that there is very little difference in structure between one show and the next*; the range of musical

idioms presented, while probably more diverse than most other stations, is still undeniably narrow. WPMU is for the most part predictable, unimaginative and repetitious. I say this not as a staff member, but as a listener, though my views do not necessarily reflect those of any substantial portion of WPMU's current audience. Keep in mind I never could stand The Grateful Dead or The Band, and put maple syrup on French Fries.

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A point often overlooked, whether deliberately or neglectfully, is that WPMU is licensed by the Federal Communications Commission as a "noncommercial, educational" FM station. To be sure, the term "educational" is ambiguous enough to encompass almost anything--anything you can get away with, that is. To the best of my somewhat limited knowledge, there are no FCC guidelines pertaining to specific programming that qualifies as "educational." Music, theoretically--depending on whose artistic theory is The Church of Your Choice--can certainly be considered educational, though, if this be the case, WPMU is offering its listenership a rather one-dimensional education. The only other educational beneficiaries of the station are staff members, who learn the broadcasting profession. Somehow, I don't think this is what the FCC had in mind when the 88-92 megacycle band was allocated for "educational" use. In this sense, WPMU is both cheating the listener and circumventing FCC regulations.)

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There is no evidence to prove that listeners will automatically avoid WPMU if the station experiments with the medium. And even if some listeners defect, they will more than likely be replaced by more adventurous listeners seeking some diversity on the FM dial.

Without a distinctive collective personality and diversity, a radio station becomes nothing more than a sophisticated form of muzak and, in WPMU's case, an unincorporated subsidiary of the record industry. WPMU can and should be more than simply an electronic petri dish for prospective Allison Steele's and Rosko's. There is a world of difference between a "radio personality" and a "disk jockey"--the former is an imaginative, broadcasting craftsman, an artist; the latter is no more than just another pretty voice.

*Lou's "Hour of the Duck" is a notable exception